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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 002498

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OSD/ISA FOR BGEN TOOLAN

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TAGS: OVIP PREL PGOV MARR TH
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF BGEN JOHN TOOLAN

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

¶1. (C) Summary. John, your visit to Thailand will allow you to assess the current political situation, get a sense of Thai-Burmese relations and attend portions of the Cobra Gold exercise. It will also allow you to underscore Washington's desire that Thailand maintain timetables for drafting a new constitution and holding elections this year. Continued political missteps by the Council for National Security (CNS) and concerns over the draft Constitution have led to growing criticism by the media and to several small demonstrations. Public confidence in the effectiveness of the junta to manage the country, let alone reform politics, is dropping but the Prime Minister insists that the schedule for the return to an elected government will be maintained. Despite our concerns over the return to democracy, Thailand remains important to U.S. strategic interests in the region. Thailand continues to provide the United States a unique platform in Asia. Cobra Gold is America's largest annual joint/combined multilateral training exercise in the Asia Pacific Region and includes the active participation of Japan, Singapore and Indonesia. While applauding the multinational nature of the exercise, you can privately stress to your interlocutors that the policy decision whether to participate in the exercise was made only after deliberation at senior levels in Washington and that we expect the Thai to fulfill their commitment to return to democracy. Your visit to the Burmese border will allow you to get a first hand understanding of some of the issues vexing Thai-Burmese relations and your visit to key military installations will afford you a chance to see the importance of Thailand to our regional security interests. END SUMMARY.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

¶2. (C) A growing number of persons in the Thai media and intelligentsia are questioning the competence or ethics of CNS leaders and there have been a number of peaceful demonstrations protesting the September 19 coup, aspects of the draft constitution or the leadership of the interim government. In the coming weeks, many expect more demonstrations by those seeking amendments to the draft constitution -- including demonstrations by Buddhist leaders seeking to make Buddhism the national religion, an issue of concern given the ongoing violence in the Muslim-majority far south. Should the constitution referendum fail, the political situation could become even more complicated. PM Surayud Chulanont has publicly assured his people that he will adhere to timetables to submit a new constitution to the electorate and to hold a national election in December, yet rumors of a "re-coup" led by hard-liners seeking to attack former PM Thaksin Shinawatra more aggressively, reinstatement

of martial law in Bangkok to curb demonstrations, or possible delays in elections are making the rounds. Political gossip and speculation is a popular pastime in Bangkok -- for every rumor that CNS head GEN Sonthi Boonyaratglin and PM Surayud have had a falling out, there is a counter rumor that they are determined to continue to work together amicably until an elected government is in place. Your visit will be a good opportunity to tell the Thai military in no uncertain terms that reinstatement of martial law, any "re-coup" or slipping of timetables would be opposed roundly in the international community and have an adverse impact on the U.S.-Thai relationship.

THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

¶13. (C) Prior to the coup, bilateral relations with Thailand were very good and we are optimistic that this will be the case after a new government is in place. We continue to focus on ways to ensure that our strategic interests in maintaining access to Thai military facilities, assisting Thailand counter regional terrorism, fight transnational crime and stop the spread of new disease are protected until an elected government is in place. Thailand is a treaty ally and has been firmly supportive of our fight against terrorism and has participated in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). It is a key partner in our efforts to assist refugees and counter narcotics. American businesses have over \$20 billion in direct investment in Thailand. The United States is Thailand's largest export market and its second-largest foreign investor.

THE OVERALL SECURITY RELATIONSHIP

¶14. (C) The U.S.-Thai security relationship is based on over 50 years of close cooperation. Thai soldiers, sailors and

BANGKOK 00002498 002.2 OF 004

airmen participated in the Korean and Vietnamese Conflicts and Thai peacekeepers served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Prior to coup sanctions, Thailand was the fourth largest participant in the U.S. International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Thailand's willingness to allow the United States to use Utaapao Naval Air Station as the hub for our regional tsunami assistance program was key to making Operation Unified Assistance a success. As you know from your visit there in January, Utaapao is a unique facility and our most important Cooperative Security Location (CSL) in the Asia Pacific Region. In your meetings with Thai military officials, you will want to note our determination to return to a more healthy military-military relationship once a democratically elected government is in place.

COUNTERTERRORISM AND SOUTHERN THAILAND

¶15. (C) Southern Thailand, in particular the southernmost Muslim majority provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, has experienced episodic violence since it was incorporated into the Siamese Kingdom in 1902. However, since January 2004 over 2,000 persons have been killed either by militants or by security forces; the level of violence has worsened in recent months. Several particularly heinous incidents -- including the brutal execution murders of eight Buddhist van passengers -- have triggered reprisal acts of violence such as a grenade attack against a mosque that injured 14. Despite these recent events, PM Surayud has maintained his commitment to finding a peaceful settlement to the situation.

He has made several gestures of goodwill towards militants: in November he apologized for past human rights abuses by security officials; he has pledged to increase cooperation with Malaysian authorities; consider opportunities to negotiate with separatists; he reinstated the interagency security coordination centers that were dissolved by Thaksin that served to defuse tensions and investigate incidents; and, he has pledged to make amnesty a part of any eventual peace settlement. However, analysts are skeptical that any progress can be made until basic security is guaranteed in

the region. Other plans put forward by the RTA, including arming Buddhist paramilitary "ranger units," seem less well thought out and run the risk of exacerbating the unrest.

¶6. (C) In order to avoid redirecting the anger of insurgents towards the United States and linking the insurgency to the international jihadist movement -- a link that is currently absent -- we ensure that any offers of assistance or training pass the "location and label" test. Put simply, we keep U.S. military personnel away from the far south and we make sure that we do not label any assistance or training as directly linked to the southern situation. Examples of the types of training we offer the Thai to improve their ability to counter insurgents include:

--Conducting a Non-Lethal Weapons Seminar and deploying a Non Lethal Weapons mobile training team (MTT) designed to assist Thai soldiers conduct quasi-police functions like crowd control and less than lethal use of force.

--Setting up a U.S. Information Operations Team to assist the Royal Thai Army (RTA) to develop psyops capabilities such as target audience analysis, effect, message development, product development and distribution.

--Assigning a U.S. Civil Affairs Planner to assist the RTA develop better Civil Affairs programs in the south.

--Dispatching mobile education teams to conduct courses on Human Rights/Law of Armed Conflict and the Legal Aspects of Counter Terrorism and Domestic Military Operations.

--Each year, U.S. Special Operation Forces conduct about five Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) exercises throughout Thailand. The primary purpose of these exercises is to maintain military skills, improve interoperability, and gain access to facilities and influence key military leaders. Each mission lasts approximately six weeks and focuses on training Royal Thai special operations and conventional forces -- including the Thai Delta Force, Thai Army Special Forces and Thai Navy SEALS. Each JCET targets 150-200 soldiers for training. Skill sets include: direct action hostage rescue, raids, ambushes, special reconnaissance (urban and rural), advanced urban combat, jungle operations, combat medical training, battalion level counter insurgency (COIN), parachute, psychological and riverine operations. Air Force JCETS focus on Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) and rotary wing night flying to support Royal Thai Navy, Army and

BANGKOK 00002498 003.2 OF 004

Air Force CT units.

--Conducting courses run by the Defense Institute for International Legal Studies' (DIILS) Legal Aspects of Combating Terrorism Mobile Training Team (MTT). DIILS has conducted 13 MTTs in Thailand since 1996. Topics included Peace Operations, Military Operations other than War, Human Rights Violations, Law of the Sea, and Legal Aspects of Combating Terrorism. Each seminar targeted 50-60 participants from the Thai MOD, Royal Thai Supreme Command, Ministry of Justice, NSC, Special Police Branch, MFA and Counter Terrorism Operations Center. Following the death of scores of Muslim protesters at Tak Bai in 2005, DIILS conducted a special Human Rights Violation/Law of Armed Conflict MTT at Royal Thai Supreme Command. DIILS has assisted in developing a comprehensive strategic plan for educating and training the military and police to conduct themselves in accord with international rules of behavior. DIILS will conduct a Legal Aspects of Counter Terrorism MTT in late May, 2007.

¶7. (C) We are exploring other ways to assist the Thai. For example:

--We are discussing whether to expand the multi-national participation in Cobra Gold and evolving the exercise to

include more counter insurgency and counter terrorism training.

--We have a number of efforts underway to improve the Thai military's command, control, communications, computers and intelligence (C4I) capabilities that will improve their ability to coordinate counter insurgency operations among units and with the police.

--A number of senior Thai RTA officers have asked for assistance in developing better training materials for Thai soldiers at the RTA Infantry Center and to improve instruction in identifying and defeating IEDs, conduct better Civil Military Operations and Information Operations.

MILITARY EXERCISE PROGRAM

18. (C) Thailand gives the U.S. military a platform for exercises unique in Asia. Thailand offers the United States good base infrastructure, large areas in which our aircraft and ground forces can conduct unrestricted operations, and access to bombing ranges -- all in short supply in Asia. Located near strategic maritime choke points and having good liberty ports, Thailand also has the potential to play a greater role in U.S. Naval planning. Perhaps due to their lack of a colonial heritage, Thai leaders are far more willing to host multilateral exercises than are other countries in Asia. Unlike Japan, which only hosts annual bilateral exercises due to legal prohibitions over collective security, or Australia, which avoids multilateral exercises so as not to "dumb down" its own training opportunities, the Royal Thai Government supports multilateral exercises as a way to show regional leadership. This has allowed us to use our exercises in Thailand to further key U.S. objectives such as supporting Japan's growing military role in Asia and engaging the TNI. The Thai are aware that we only approved this year's Cope Tiger air exercise and Cobra Gold exercise after high-level discussions.

THE ROLE OF CHINA AND INDIA IN THE REGION

19. (C) Thailand continues to feel the rising influence of China and has improved military links with India. While emphasizing the vital role of the U.S. in the region -- and Thailand's desire to intensify U.S. engagement -- Thai leaders also focus on developing stronger relations with the two regional powers. Bangkok views both countries as sources of unlimited consumer demand and hopes to conclude Free Trade Agreements with both nations. The Thai military has a number of Chinese weapons systems in its arsenal and mil-mil contacts are improving. For example, RTA CINC GEN Sonthi visited PRC Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan and Vice President Zeng Qinghong during a four-day visit to Beijing in January. While Thai military links with the United States are deeper and far more apparent than Sino-Thai links, China's growing influence in Thailand and Southeast Asia is evident in business, the arts, the media and the military. The PLA Navy has close links with the RTN and recently conducted a major ship visit to Phuket. After jointly holding a limited naval exercise in the Andaman Sea in 2005, Thailand and China are exploring conducting joint SAR exercises. The RTN has

BANGKOK 00002498 004.2 OF 004

acquired several ships from China over the past decade. China is refurbishing tanks and air defense equipment provided to Thailand in the late 1980's. Mil-to-mil exchanges between China and Thailand have expanded in recent years as has the number of bilateral military VIP visits.

COBRA GOLD

110. (C) Your visit will allow you to attend parts of the annual Cobra Gold exercise. This is the 26th iteration of Cobra Gold. The exercise has evolved from a bilateral event designed to repel an armored invasion from Vietnam to a multilateral Command Post Exercise (CPX) coupled with a

U.S.-Thai joint/combined Field Training Exercise (FTX) and multilateral engineering and medical civil affairs projects (ENCAPS/MEDCAPS). This year, Thailand, the United States, Singapore, Japan and Indonesia will participate in the CPX which will focus on a PKO scenario. The U.S., Thailand, Singapore and Japan will take part in MEDCAPS/ENCAPS and several countries, including the PRC, Australia, France, Germany, the Philippines and Korea will observe the exercise.

MARFORPAC will lead the U.S. contingent for Cobra Gold this year and next year. Marines and soldiers will conduct ground exercises in various parts of the country. We expect F-18s and KC-130s from the USMC, P-3's and F-18s from the USN and B-52s and C-130s from the USAF to participate. Plans for the 13th MEU to participate were overcome by events but we will have a ship presence from the Navy.

¶11. (U) I look forward to seeing you during your visit.
BOYCE